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ABSTRACT

There are several reasons why the Open University (Great Britain) should define the teaching objectives of their text editors and designers--and how they can best be achieved--including the wide range of student abilities and the allocation of resources. A model of the functions of textbook design and editing would help provide a basis for an editorial house-style more suited to the university's special problems. Such a model would consider three basic areas: the enabling function--the physical and psychological features of the volume itself; the aesthetic function--features such as illustrations, color, quality paper, and durable binding; and the access function--the organization or structure of the information that allows retrieval and helps form an effective reading strategy. The need for access structure is often ignored, but research evidence in the areas of learning styles, the way efficient readers read, and student workload favors the selective reading such a structure allows. Most of the university's texts are too long for students to read in the time allowed. The access structure provides a way for students to allocate their time efficiently. An access structure that truly reflects the content, structure, and purpose of the text would be the product of textbook editing and design based on the university's teaching objectives. (HTH)

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Notes on transforming 2 / Robert Waller / March 1977

THREE FUNCTIONS OF TEXT PRESENTATION

What do designers and editors contribute to the effectiveness of educational texts? In case this should seem an idle or possibly even insulting question, it is worth mentioning that although the Open University employs a large number of designers and editors, it has never defined how they should go about improving the quality of our product. Our product, of course, is primarily education - only incidentally is it books and broadcasts.

EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS MATTERS...

In many kinds of publishing it is not necessary to define the roles of editors and designers very closely. It is usually enough to know who takes care of each production step - marking-up manuscripts, correcting proofs, preparing layouts and so on. But there are several good reasons why the Open University should go further and try to define the teaching objectives of editors and designers, and how they can best be achieved.

One reason lies in the kind of the education we offer. Our correspondence texts are not just optional extras to personally-

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FOR BETTER COURSES AND...

taught courses, or cribs containing information or facts. They are the main part of the system and so have to incorporate a lot of the strategies that face-to-face teachers use to help students learn. Added to our distance-teaching problems are the uncertainties that come with open-entry education. We cannot predict very much at all about the abilities and previous knowledge of our students. This means that we have to provide a text that allows people to study in the way that suits them best. Railroading people through unsuitable courses and study methods causes many kinds of educational problem. Text is a traditionally linear medium and no-one should think it a simple task to use it on its own to achieve flexible, open-ended teaching. Designers and editors, together with educational technologists, have the job of helping lecturers to use this medium well.

... FOR RESOURCE ALLOCATION

Some other reasons why we need to think about the functions of design and editing are more political. A current issue is the allocation of resources to courses. The texts for 'low-resource' courses by-pass the studio - if they work as well as other courses people will be entitled to ask 'Why have design at all?'. Print resources such as second-colour printing now have to be bid for at the Course Resources Committee, although no-one has yet come up with any educational criteria for allowing or refusing them. Misunderstandings between faculties and Operations departments might not happen so often if we understood more about the educational role of these departments.

A model of the functions of design and editing would, then, help in several ways. It would help provide a basis for an editorial

house-style more suited to our special problems. It would inform current discussions about alternative management structures for Operations staff. It would also give us a clearer idea of the sort of research that is needed to tell how our texts could be improved.

DESIGN + EDITING ARE TRANSFORMING ACTIVITIES

Design and editing are part of the larger process of transforming. In many ways the terms are a rather artificial demarcation of roles - for instance, we cannot separate the problem of writing headings, instructions or captions from the problem of laying them out on the page. It makes much more sense for researchers to consider design and editing together, as the presentation aspect of transforming. They form the 'How to say it' side that complements the 'What to say' of subject-matter analysis. Fig. 1 (page 4) shows how the two sides of transforming relate.

THREE FUNCTIONS OF TEXT PRESENTATION . . .

The model of text presentation that I suggest is shown in Fig. 2 (page 4). It lists most of the features of a typical Open University correspondence text, with the exception of the main teaching discourse and the diagrams and illustrations that form part of that discourse. These features, which comprise both text components and attributes of components, are grouped under three headings that try to describe the way they affect the activity of reading. Many of the items are, of course, interdependent and interchangeable, but the diagram serves as a basis for discussion.

<u>The Enabling function</u>

CLEARING THE WAY

The purpose of the enabling function of transforming is simply to provide a clear channel of communication for the written word. Human factors, both physiological and psychological

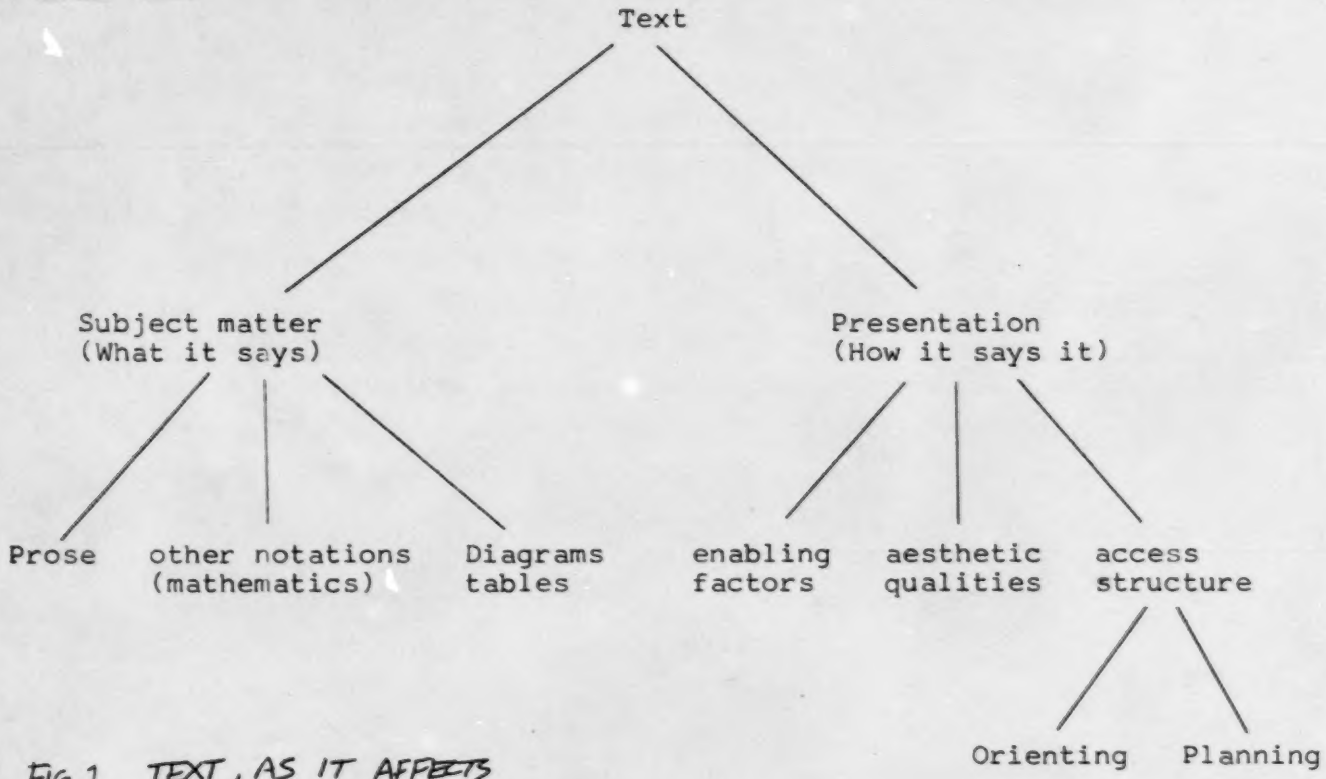

FIG 1 TEXT, AS IT AFFECTS THE TRANSFORMER

ENABLING	AESTHETIC	ACCESS	
		Orienting	Planning
• Legible type • Convenience of handling and storage • Spelling and grammar	• Enrichment illustrations • Luxury factors (squareback, quality paper)	• Headings • Numbering system • Title page • Index • Abstract, summary • Glossary • Text descriptors (essential reading, etc.)	• Contents list • Study guide • Introduction • Objectives • List of units • Study instructions • The orienting devices on scanning

FIG 2 THREE FUNCTIONS OF TEXT PRESENTATION

must be considered: the book must not be too large to hold, or the type too small to read; and normal conventions of spelling and punctuation must be observed if the book is to be understood. Although these considerations are so basic, it is nevertheless possible to get it wrong. In spite of the printed plea, there is hardly a letterbox in the land large enough to cope with an Open University text in its envelope. Yellow and light orange have been chosen as second colours; and bindings frequently fall apart.

The Aesthetic function

PROVIDING A GOOD READING ENVIRONMENT

The aesthetic function includes those features of texts that are often described as 'cosmetic': illustrations that enrich the text rather than explain it; luxury features like colour, fine paper, square-back binding and so on. Everyone at the Open University is justifiably proud of the tradition of well-designed covers that we have built up. Whether or not they affect student performance has never been established; very probably 'enrichment' features are just some of a number of aspects of text presentation that affect students' motivation to read, and their persistence in reading. There is certainly a striking contrast between the well-produced course units and the rather tatty collection of broadcast notes, ancillary material, offprints, errata and questionnaires that make up the rest of our textual communication.

The Access function

TEACHING

The third category stands in contrast to the first two because it is pedagogic in intention. The first two functions apply to any book and

represent the classic aims of the designer and editor, but this one contains features that are specific to texts that are meant to be studied.

The access structure of a text helps the reader in two ways. It has an orienting function that identifies particular parts of the text, and it has a planning function that structures the text and shows how the different parts relate.

ACCESS TO CONTENT...

The orienting devices identify parts of the text both in terms of content - they tell you what a chapter is about, for instance - and in terms of status - they tell you how a particular item fits into the book or page as a whole.

AND STRUCTURE

The planning function helps you to see the overall structure of the text, and by implication the subject-matter, in advance. This helps you to form an effective reading strategy (which may be formal or unconscious). It helps you to decide how you are going to tackle a book in the time available, shows you how it fits into the educational system as a whole with its other media and assessments, and tells you how the content of the book relates to your previous knowledge and ways of thinking.

SO WHAT'S NEW?

The need for an access structure seems obvious to some people, but others quite rightly ask why, if design and editing really affects the teaching quality of textbooks, there are no well worked out procedures for ensuring this quality. Why, too, has their been so little research to investigate the effect of their activity on learners?

ACCESS TO TEXTS HAS BEEN IGNORED...

The answer may well lie in our ignorance about the way people use books. Frank Hatt has shown how unrealistic models of the reading process are when they take the coming together of the reader and the text as 'given'. He says "This is hardly satisfactory. If we accept that a reader's mental 'set' is a key factor in reading performance, then it would seem that the approach route to the text is crucial". Similarly, Reg Melton noted in a recent review of research on objectives how many of the research designs prevented readers from going back and reviewing the text that they had read, before answering the test questions - in other words they enforced an unnatural reading strategy on their subjects to the extent that it would be impossible to extrapolate their findings to the real world.

BECAUSE OF WRONG ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT READING.

There has been a great deal of research published on reading, but very little of it deals with amounts of text very much longer than one or two pages. This is probably because the longer the text, the more difficult it is to control all the variables and to analyse the results. Recent work, though, is beginning to pull down an assumption that underlies a lot of ideas about books - the assumption that they have just one point of entry and one way through. And the importance of the access structure of the text is only clear when the wide range of potential readers' purposes is understood.

READERS ARE SELECTIVE

This research is discussed in Notes on Transforming 3, but to summarise we can find evidence for selective reading in three areas.

RESEARCH ON LEARNING...

Firstly there is research on learning styles that shows how a text that sequences the teaching material to suit one kind of student may be unnecessarily hard for another, simply because it forces him to tackle difficult new concepts in an order that is inappropriate to his previous knowledge and his style of thinking.

ON READING...

Then there is some interesting research on the way efficient readers read - one thing about which the researchers agree is that a once-through, steady read without regressions is ineffective for complex texts.

ON WORKLOAD.

The most convincing evidence for selective reading comes from studies of student workload. It is by now common knowledge that many Open University texts are too long for most students to read in the time they have available. They have to decide how to allocate their limited time, and an important purpose of the access structure of a text is to provide the means by which they can select sensibly.

The provision of an access structure that truly reflects the content, structure and purpose of the text will be the product of good transforming - editing and designing that contributes to the effectiveness of our teaching. The components of a good access structure will be discussed in later Notes on Transforming.

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